

F I E L D





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OSIP MANDELSTAM

*A FIELD SYMPOSIUM*







## OSIP MANDELSTAM: A SYMPOSIUM

Most poets and readers of poetry now recognize that Osip Mandelstam, whose hundredth year we are celebrating in this symposium, is among this century's very greatest poets. That does not mean, however, that it has been easy to find participants for this symposium. The sheer difficulty of the poet's work, coupled with the handicap of translation (not many contemporary American poets are able to read him in the original Russian), led to a number of polite refusals when we were assembling this particular symposium.

In light of that, we're especially grateful to Franz Wright, Agha Shahid Ali, Sylva Fischerová, Martha Collins, and Robert Bly along with our own David Young, for their contributions. Their choices of poems, and the emphases they give to their reasons for choosing them and for wanting to help shape a tribute to this poet, reflect the variety and density of Mandelstam's canon, a canon still coming into view through translation by a number of hands, and one surrounded by some especially helpful documents, most notably Nadezhda Mandelstam's memoir, *Hope Against Hope*, itself a literary masterpiece.

Mandelstam's fate is so affecting that we need to develop a special kind of caution not to diminish his stature by seeing him simply as a pathetic and victimized writer. His curious confidence as a poet, aware of his tradition and connected with it in invigorating fashion, his sheer inventiveness and the increasing inner spiritual radiance that informs his poems — these qualities offset the brutal historical circumstances that tortured and then destroyed him. They are the qualities celebrated here, and if they send readers back to the translations, to the landmark volume of Brown and Merwin as well as to a number of recent and notable translations of particular phases and volumes and to a growing critical literature in English, that will help insure that Mandelstam's second century finds him more fully understood and appreciated than did his first.

Take from my palms, to soothe your heart,  
a little honey, a little sun,  
in obedience to Persephone's bees.

You can't untie a boat that was never moored,  
nor hear a shadow in its furs,  
nor move through thick life without fear.

For us, all that's left is kisses  
tattered as the little bees  
that die when they leave the hive.

Deep in the transparent night they're still humming,  
at home in the dark wood on the mountain,  
in the mint and lungwort and the past.

But lay to your heart my rough gift,  
this unlovely dry necklace of dead bees  
that once made a sun out of honey.

November 1920

*translated by Clarence Brown and W. S. Merwin*

PERSEPHONE'S BEES: THOUGHTS ON MANDELSTAM

I am working here from the translation by W. S. Merwin and Clarence Brown and would like to begin by acknowledging the debt of gratitude I feel to this team and their accomplishment with Mandelstam. Two gifted translators have come together in this instance to create what I believe is a great poem in English. It deserves our faith and trust, and it should serve to remind us that so-called free verse has the very same musical and rhythmical resources at its command as so-called formal verse. Perhaps we cannot expect Joseph Brodsky to understand that fact, but for anyone who grew up speaking American English and reading American poetry, any assertion to the contrary sounds like willful ignorance.

For my own part, I find writing about Mandelstam extremely daunting. There is something that sets him apart, even from the company of an Eliot or a Rilke or a Celan. It lies partly in the fact that he knowingly wrote and signed his death sentence, assuring his descent by the composition of a single brief poem, one that would not even be noticed in our culture. His short poem satirizing Stalin, for which one of his friends turned him in, led to his arrest and eventually his death. So there is something uncanny about him, about the death-beckoning intensity of his convictions. More than Pasternak, even more than Akhmatova, he would not or could not compromise, as his wife's memoir makes clear. Other poets, such as Rilke, address the spirit of Orpheus, the spirit of Christ; Mandelstam came to embody that Christ-like or Orphic spirit. He did descend. Whether he consciously chose to or not is of little importance. Has anyone ever chosen to?

But these events were still far-off when he composed "Take from my palms . . . ." The poem possesses, in its initial setting, a kind of pre-Edenic innocence. Its speaker is an Orpheus who has done nothing wrong, has not disobeyed even the most illogical of the god's commands and so has not lost all and been torn to pieces for his error. Instead he has retained, in a saddened and aging, yet real and corporeal form, the gift of poetic perception and the gift of love. These two things turn out to be one and the same.



Since he has kept faith with love and endured its seasons — Persephone's comings and goings rather than Eurydice's disappearance — and has patiently endured the fluctuations of inspiration's power to transform reality, mortality is not a curse but a cause for grave and sober celebration. Hence the gift, a humble offering that symbolizes the fragile gifts of love and poetry.

How lovely it is that Mandelstam chose to mention, with seeming offhandedness, the mint and lungwort. Perhaps they are the herbs visited by Persephone's bees. In any case, they are plants to which, traditionally, powers to aid clear breathing and memory are attributed, two vital functions to the citizens of the underworld who are invoked in so many of Mandelstam's poems of this period. And the herbs are two items in a list where the third element is the past: two concrete objects linked with something invisible, all in one breath. With elegant simplicity, the poet reminds us of the awesome reality of the past: how much more of it there is, and how ghostly and threadbare our present brief opportunity to breathe under the sun is by comparison. That is not a call to despair so much as an invitation to savor our humble gift.

In *The Sheltering Sky*, writing the dark story of a long-time relationship between a man and a woman, Paul Bowles says:

Love for [him] meant loving her — there was no question of anyone else. And for so long there had been no love, no possibility of it. But in spite of her willingness to become whatever he wanted her to become, she could not change that much: the terror was always there inside her, ready to take command. It was useless to pretend otherwise. And just as she was unable to shake off the dread that was always with her, he was unable to break out of the cage into which he had shut himself . . . long ago to save himself from love.

What a remarkable image to end this passage with. To protect ourselves from something dangerous don't we usually place *it* inside the cage? But this brings to mind one of those little cells marine scientists lock themselves into far under the water in order to observe the behavior of the most mindlessly ferocious creatures down there, in *that* underworld. What is Bowles's character

protecting himself from? What unspeakably menacing form has love taken on in his mind? Clearly it is a force capable of obliterating him, attacking and annihilating the self. We realize that what is actually going on here is his perception of love as a giving up, a sacrificing of the self. To take on complete emotional responsibility for the well-being of another soul would entail a concomitant loss of privacy, solitude and concentration. It would interrupt the spiritual state essential to his exploration of the self, always the self. And the beloved, once a door spontaneously and effortlessly standing open in the quest for inner illumination, would become a wall.

We sense none of this self-absorbed anxiety in Mandelstam's poem. Instead, there is the desire and the courage to renounce the seduction of the self, the catastrophe of living-for-the-self-alone. There is a willingness to enter the unknowable self of the beloved, the other which one seeks mysteriously to become one with, which one *desires* without expecting anything in return. A terrible risk is involved — the loss of the self. Char wrote, "May risk light your way." Mandelstam signifies the fearful decision to seek and regain the self through devoting it to another by means of the gift, the necklace. It is a gift of remembered and reminding things, the sacramental giving of a "ring" — the eternal symbol of our subject, a constantly resurrected Persephone. There is a turning toward the source of what the self has come to think of as its own light, a turning toward the companion who is, finally and perhaps for the first time, a self, no figment of his need but separate and real as he.

"Take from my palms . . ." is surrounded, in the particular period of Mandelstam's poetry in which it was composed, by evocations of death, oblivion and descent. It draws its imagery from the Greek mythology that he loved and that reflects his determination to compose a poetry purely classical by nature, a poetry that had little in common with romantic poetry's obsession with the self. In Mandelstam, as in other great modernist poets, we find an awed manipulation of the real objects of the world, objects that continue to express the individual's thoughts and feelings but that also help poems take on a more universal human expression.

This poem possesses the unmistakable aura of being staged *in the world*, among its dear and commonplace mysteries. What we are witnessing is not romance but resurrection, love's resurrection. Resurrection is hard and unattractive, like birth. We are reminded of this when we consider another well-known myth, that of Lazarus. Think of the grave-wrappings stuck to his flesh: one might have trouble finding the stomach to unwind them from his face.

Mandelstam's poem is one of the few written by anyone in our century that manages to transcend literature, to the same degree that poetry can transcend prose. Rare poems such as this attain a power to emanate emotion and thought that approaches the supernatural. For me this term has no heavenly connotations. On the contrary, I apply it in a very earthly sense to refer to the awe experienced by human beings when the inner pressure of remembrance or an abrupt interruption in the distracting struggle for survival allows them to realize that they *have* feelings and memories and thoughts about the mystery of their universe that can compel them to utter sounds. These sounds are true poetry, the best of which has always embodied skilled upwellings of song-like structures, spells, prayers, lamentations, or a triumphant joy inexpressible by any other means. True poetry shows nature that we are capable of being just as enigmatic and beyond explanation as it is. By means of it we claim our right to participate in its strange workings and manifestations.

The technical expertise involved in works of literature is helpless to explain this spiritual experience. It involves a sense of language as not simply describing external reality, but rivaling it, a belief in the power of words — when spoken in a certain secret order known only to a few adepts — to change reality and influence important events. Our own tradition carries this special sense of the power of language in the Biblical events reported in *Genesis*, where God causes objects — water, light, and so forth — to come into being by *uttering* them, then assigns man the job of *naming* the animals into fuller existence, and in *The Book of John*, based on the concept of the *logos*, the word made flesh.

Some years ago it was fashionable to classify as "hermetic" — a term with undeniably arcane associations — the writings of



supposedly difficult and secretive poets like Mandelstam. I'm suggesting, however, a constant in our experience that relates to the poetic outcome of human beings finding themselves up against the futility of logical thought and expression and then discovering that they have the power, through a concentrated and highly charged use of speech or song to placate, ward off, heal or daringly *invite* internal forces (ones we would now discuss in psychological terms) beyond their comprehension or control to speak for them and through them. This is accomplished through the unique human power of saying, naming, voicing the things of the world: not so much to mirror them for practical purposes, but to secretly rearrange and change them for the instinctual sake of a survival more than physical and for the sake of helping the community to participate in the incessant creation of the Creation.

I believe there have been a few poets who have maintained a connection with the supernatural and superliterate dimensions of language; and if any in our century have borne the burden and glory of this connection, Osip Mandelstam is certainly to be counted among them. I hope no one will suppose that I am claiming that Mandelstam perceived himself in some shamanistic light. As a Russian poet he naturally attached a high sense of calling and dignity to his position. But a poet like Mandelstam can never be pinned down. Certainly he could be secretive and ritualistic when it came to his sources of inspiration. In her magnificent book, *Hope Against Hope*, his wife speaks touchingly, for example, of the surprise he might express when he realized that others did not experience the same overwhelming significance he perceived in the number of verses in a poem. At the same time, he was constantly and fiercely aware of himself as an artist, a master of his craft.

As previously noted, many of the 1920 poems draw their imagery from the ancient Greek visualization of the afterlife. Mandelstam was seeking ways of turning away from direct, philosophical expression of the inner life. He was interested in things — the necklace of dead bees — and, like Rilke, in myth's modern malleability and relevance. These are preoccupations that he shared, as I've indicated, with other modernists. Yet there is al-



ways something different and disturbing about his brand of modernism. It certainly derives partly from his fate. There is an element of Greek drama about what happened, so that we cannot read his poems touching on descent to the Greek or Dantean underworld without a pang of horror. We know what Mandelstam could not know when he wrote them, that in the course of his own life he would have to enter hell himself. The Greek version is a place of oblivion, very different from the cruel and insane Christian conception of a place of wide-awake torture that proceeds without end. Mandelstam's fate was to combine these two hells, or so we surmise from what we can piece together about his last days.

Is this why "Take from my palms . . . ," while relatively early, written when the poet was around thirty, sometimes sounds as if it was spoken by a much older man, even by a ghost?

Love poems are usually associated with the euphoric, fairytale period of early love, when it is untouched by sorrow or discord. But from the first moment of this one, not least in the somewhat frightening and melancholy figure of Persephone, we receive the far more complex sensation that love has had and repeatedly will have its changes, its seasons, its deaths and dormancies, its reawakenings. Love's rebirths are miraculous and touching because they can be felt at every moment to be ephemeral. They are not only the spring but the memory of every spring, linking us to the first one when age and love's alterations were still inconceivable.

Mandelstam's poem commemorates enduring love and is at the same time haunted to some degree by a sense of resignation and loss. It remains the embodiment of love experience while taking on the coloration of time. Hence the revelation it expresses, by its existence and the necessity of its composition: the need to love is an infinitely greater desire than the need to be loved.

People can survive without being loved. But no matter how poor human beings become, how bereft of things or spirit, they must love. They must love someone or something beyond the self or *they cease to have a self at all*. And to love involves in part the need to give. Giving will find a way, even where there is nothing that

begins to be commensurate with what one feels. In Mandelstam's case, the gift is the poem itself. It is certainly the most moving poem of love I am familiar with. It expresses the fact that in love we are infinitely poor. We have no thing, object or word of great enough value to equal what we are going through when we realize the value another soul has for us, and at the same time recognize the impossibility of penetrating the other with our soul, with what we feel. We have nothing but inadequate symbols.

Another of poetry's many origins may have to do with the wish to circumvent this agonizing dilemma. Skillfully employed and placed in the correct order, made into song or prayer, might there not be, we feel, a way of employing words that both expresses what the lover is feeling and approximates an ability to penetrate the soul of the beloved as no object or body ever can? The power of Mandelstam's poem resides in the fact that the lover is able to state, with astonishingly concentrated and various brilliance, by way of ravishing images of poverty, that the world, the sun, the universe itself, could they be bestowed, would not be enough. In any event, he has nothing to offer but these husks of bees — Persephone's bees — who once made a sun out of honey, as perhaps he himself has attempted to do. There is nothing to give but these words, these dead bees, this absent wax and honey and light. There is an enormous sadness in all this, but also a sense of happiness in the survival of rough, daily love. The lovers are not separated, lost to each other. The earth has survived, a whole world exists and endures in its humble, unexplainable seasons that faith knows will always return. It endures as a particle of a sun that once exploded and, at an unimaginable distance but still close enough to blind us, goes on exploding forever.

We shall meet again, in Petersburg,  
as though we had buried the sun there,  
and then we shall pronounce for the first time  
the blessed word with no meaning.  
In the Soviet night, in the velvet dark,  
in the black velvet Void, the loved eyes  
of blessed women are still singing,  
flowers are blooming that will never die.

The capital hunches like a wild cat,  
a patrol is stationed on the bridge,  
a single car rushes past in the dark,  
snarling, hooting like a cuckoo.  
For this night I need no pass.  
I'm not afraid of the sentries.  
I will pray in the Soviet night  
for the blessed word with no meaning.

A rustling, as in a theater,  
and a girl suddenly crying out,  
and the arms of Cypris are weighed down  
with roses that will never fall.  
For something to do we warm ourselves at a bonfire,  
maybe the ages will die away  
and the loved hands of blessed women  
will brush the light ashes together.

Somewhere audiences of red flowers exist,  
and the fat sofas of the loges,  
and a clockwork officer  
looking down on the world.  
Never mind if our candles go out  
in the velvet, in the black Void. The bowed shoulders  
of the blessed women are still singing.  
You'll never notice the night's sun.

25 November 1920

*translated by Clarence Brown and W. S. Merwin*



THE BLESSED WORD

“ . . . while outside the storm, that is, the infinite, rages in vain.”

— Roland Barthes

I cannot divorce Mandelstam's poetry from his life though I still am trained to look New Critically, stripping poems of biography. Osip Mandelstam and a few other poets — Nazim Hikmet, Faiz Ahmed Faiz, Garcia Lorca — compel me to ignore that training. No matter what Auden says about Yeats, the death of this Russian poet could not and cannot be kept from his poems. Nor could, nor can his exile. No one would dare.

Clarence Brown, in his introduction to Nadezhda Mandelstam's *Hope Against Hope*, narrates: One May evening in 1965 the “students of the Mechanical Mathematics Department of Moscow University had organized on their own initiative the first memorial evening of Mandelstam's poetry to be held in Russia. They invited Ilia Ehrenburg . . . to preside.” At one point

Ehrenburg mentioned rather hesitantly . . . that Nadezhda Yakovlevna was in the auditorium. He continued, “She lived through all the difficult years with Mandelstam, went into exile with him, saved all of his poems. . . . I hesitated whether I should say the poet's widow was at this first evening. I don't ask her to come down here. . . .” But here his words were smothered under thunderous applause that lasted for a long time. Everyone stood. Finally, Nadezhda Yakovlevna herself stood and a hush fell upon the house. Turning to face the audience, she said, “Mandelstam wrote, ‘I'm not accustomed yet to panegyrics. . . .’ Forget that I'm here. Thank you.” And she sat down. But the applause would not die away for a long time.

Whenever I recall this passage, that is, almost each time I read Mandelstam, I find myself choked.

For this symposium I've focused on “We shall meet again, in Petersburg,” a first line that announces heartbreak as the poem's

craft. Mandelstam never returned to Petersburg, only to Lenin-grad — and then again there was exile, where he perhaps reinvented Petersburg. The poem speaks to me because of the condition of my homeland today, Kashmir, the Valley longing to be free, the Vale in which the Titans once sought refuge. My friends from there write, “When you leave home in the morning, you never know if you’ll return.” I want to reply, “We shall meet again, in Srinagar,” but I’m afraid to, for a promise like that already holds its own breaking, made as it is against the backdrop of “the Soviet night, in the velvet dark, / in the black velvet Void.” So in the diaspora one reinvents the past or invents the future to transform Moscow or Petersburg or Srinagar into imaginary homelands, filling them, closing them, shutting oneself in them.

Am I misreading? The reader may accuse me. But I’m really un-reading the poem, maybe de-reading it. As long as I, while seeming to take the poem away from Mandelstam, do not keep him from it, I’m not violating his words, nor his death and exile. The poem’s very fabric gives me the permission, if not the authority, to depart from it so that I may then return to Mandelstam more fully. The poem adopts strategies that enable me to do so: it raises question after question, answering none. Underlying its each move is a “maybe-ness” whereby the reader unravels and decodes it, revealing the poem beneath the poem. How else to account for the blessed word with *no* meaning, the flowers that will *never* die, the roses that will *never* fall, and the night in which the poet is *not* afraid and needs *no* pass? How else to grapple with our *never* noticing the night’s sun, preceded as it is by the imperative:

Never mind if our candles go out  
in the velvet, in the black Void.

*Never*. That word again. Negative spaces for the reader to fill in, but in such a way that the poem, though not fully clear, is never misunderstood.

“We shall meet again, in Petersburg,”: After such simplicity, the absolute clarity of that affirmation, we come up in the second

line, a subordinate clause, with the impossibility of the certainty just expressed: "as though we had buried the sun there." Is Mandelstam implying that the sun, its corpse, will be dug up, the Son resurrected? (I'm aware the pun may not exist in the Russian and that Mandelstam was Jewish.) And in that impossible moment — will the blessed word with no meaning occur? That word has no meaning in the present age, Mandelstam's, which will maybe die away, but will it acquire meaning when the meeting takes place in Petersburg? There is a strange hope here, this impossible longing made possible in the Soviet night simply because "the blessed women are still singing." As is the poet. Are they singing the blessed word itself or singing of that word, their song a prayer? Something impossible is happening in the night — flowers are blooming that will never die.

In the second stanza the poet pronounces the night as Soviet. The sun, as we already know, is buried in it. Strangely, he needs no pass, he is not afraid. Why? Perhaps because he can "pray" for the blessed word with no meaning. But that word does have meaning — for him and for the singing women. It — the word, or the Word? — has been stripped of meaning in the Soviet night, in which a patrol is stationed on the bridge and a car hoots like a cuckoo. We are far, far away from meeting again in Petersburg though we continue to be pursued by that hope. When the "arms of Cypris" are weighed down with "roses that will never fall," is the implication that the Soviet night will be over once they fall? And yet their not falling allows him to speculate, with hope perhaps, that maybe "the ages will die away / and the loved hands of blessed women / will brush the light ashes together." The plaintive persistence of the women, in contrast to the sudden cry of the girl, leads (if not to hope) perhaps to an arrested despair.

And where do the audiences of red flowers exist? Are they the flowers that will never die of the first stanza and/or the roses of the third? One can't be sure. And one shouldn't be. Nor should one be sure why we won't notice the night's sun. It may be because it is dark with excessive bright, like Milton's God, and we are so blinded that only the black Void is visible. Or it may be that if hope does not abandon us, we may not regret the going out of



the candles. Each line raises questions, but without causing confusion. I am absolutely clear that I must fill in these spaces; the poem insists I do. If Mandelstam will not allow himself, or us, any certainty, he also will not allow us a one-dimensional surrendering of hope. The tenuousness of the poem, its "maybe-ness," works in both ways. That is why the poet does not begin "Maybe we shall meet again, in Petersburg," though that unsaid "Maybe" pervades the poem.

And so, to depart from the poem again and perhaps return to it via Kashmir:

What of the night's sun there in Srinagar, the summer capital of Kashmir? There are of course the stars the guns shoot into the sky, night after night, the storm, the infinite, that rages on, it seems in vain. On Id-uz-Zuha, when people celebrate God's inability, for even God must melt sometimes, to let Ishmael (not Isaac, in Muslim legend) be executed by the hand of his father, many parts of Srinagar and of the entire Vale were under curfew. The identity card, that pass, may or may not have helped in the crackdown, if one were rounded up by the sentries of the Central Reserve Police. There was no celebration, for son after son was taken away. All this was seen by an audience of narcissi, roses, magnolias, and all the flowers of Kashmir.

And will the blessed women rub the ashes together? I recall a Kashmiri of the sixteenth century, Habba Khatun, the "most picturesque figure in the literary, musical and, one may say, human history of Kashmir," according to one historian. A peasant girl who became the queen, "she was so completely merged in the life of her people as to become anonymous, and her personality became embodied in a collection of deeply-moving songs which the people have sung and the hills re-echoed." When her husband was exiled from the Valley by the Mughal king Akbar, she "went among the people with her sorrow. . . . [Her] grief has been shared by every sensitive Kashmiri to this day; in her own time its expression roused quite a few into frenzied opposition to Mughal rule." Each fall the women of Kashmir gather the chinar leaves, singing songs, often hers, and by a rustic process create fuel for winter: they set fire to the leaves, sprinkle water on them



as they burn, and thus turn them into fragile coals. But already the reports are true, and without song: India's security forces have gang-raped and mass-raped women in the villages and have torched entire neighborhoods. The people have been roused into frenzied opposition to Indian rule, fighting one of the largest armies of the world. Maybe the ages will die away, or so we will pray in the Soviet night, in the Indian-enforced night, "and the loved hands of blessed women / will brush the light ashes together."

And that blessed word with no meaning — who will utter it? Is it Freedom? Will the women pronounce it, as if for the first time, or for the last? Srinagar too hunches like a wild cat. Sentries are stationed, in bunkers, at the city's bridges while the Jhelum flows under them, sometimes with a dismembered body. On Zero Bridge the jeeps rush by. The candles go out in the velvet Void, or they go out as travellers, to light up that Void. One day perhaps the Kashmiris will pronounce — as perhaps will the Armenians, the Croatians, the Kurds, the Palestinians, the Slovenians — that word for the truly first time. And give it meaning.

To some, winter is arak and blue-eyed punch,  
To some it's wine perfumed with cinnamon,  
To some the salty orders of cruel stars  
To be carried back into smoky huts.

Chicken-shit here and there, still warm,  
And the blundering warmth of sheep;  
I'd give up everything to live — I need life so —  
A lighted match would keep me warm.

Look, all I have in my hands is a clay bowl,  
And the twitter of stars to tickle my frail ears,  
But under this wretched feather-down you can't  
Help loving the yellow grass and warm black earth.

To curry fur in silence and turn straw,  
Starved as an apple tree wrapped up for winter,  
Filled with a tenderness for witless creatures,  
Groping in emptiness, trying to be patient.

Let the conspirators scuttle across the snow  
Like sheep, and let the snow-crust squeak,  
To some, winter is smoke and wormwood, a bivouac,  
To some, the heady salt of tragic injuries.

Oh, I'd like to hoist a lantern on a pole,  
And wander, led by my dog, under the salt stars,  
To the fortune teller's yard, with a rooster for the pot.  
But the white of the snow chews my eyes till they ache.

1922

*translated by David Young*

## STARS VERSUS SALT

Reading Russian poets in translation, knowing you not only lack the language but the context of poetic and cultural traditions that make the poetry specific, glorious, energizing, can be a discouraging process. Perhaps one should give it up, but with writers as fascinating as Mandelstam, how to resist? It's like listening to a radio program despite a lot of static, knowing you need to hear as much of it as you can.

In the case of this particular poem, I know of four translations, by W. S. Merwin and Clarence Brown, by Bernard Meares, by James Greene and by David McDuff. Each has its merits, but I've listed them in my order of preference, with Merwin/Brown and Meares very close, and Greene and McDuff a distant third and fourth. I've learned from each of them and I've learned the most, of course, by careful comparing. My own version, in this case, is more a way to get as close as possible to the poem, exploiting the four versions and adding my own ideas and hunches. It isn't intended to replace the others but to supplement them. Merwin's versions, backed up with Brown's expertise on the language, the culture and the poet, are the ones I will always love most because they gave me my first glimpses of Mandelstam and because they shine with Merwin's gift for image and phrase. They turn out not always to be as accurate as one could wish and they sometimes lose the point of the images or phrases they try to capture in English. Meares stays closer to the original, and he reveals a good ear and eye for what will work in a poem, but he sometimes gets into trouble when he tries to rhyme. The other two translators have many moments of effectiveness, but are capable of clunkers that make you wish a good poet had helped them out. McDuff's is the only book that has the Russian on facing pages, which is a reason for owning it if you have a Russian-speaking friend who can help you fine-tune your sense of what you are looking at. A glance at the text of the poem I'm treating here, for example, shows that the same phrase, "To some," begins each of the first three lines. McDuff's is the only version that does that in English, but it's interesting to know that the formal

repetition is a part of the poet's design. I'm not saying all the translators should have faithfully reflected it, just that it's a useful bit of information. Translation is made up of thousands of small interlocking choices, and you simply can't dictate rules or formulas for its success; you have to allow the translator to go where she or he feels comfortable in the pursuit and partial capture of the original, not to mention the creation of a new poem in the second language. If Merwin/Brown is sometimes rather far from Mandelstam, what compensates is the fresh and deeply moving quality of their versions, poems that live in the memory and make us realize what all the fuss concerning this poet is based on.

"To some, winter . . ." is from Mandelstam's 1928 volume and marks a shift in his imagery from classically and mythically based characters and situations to a world recognizably Russian and historical, shot through with implications of folklore and politics. I can best introduce its subject and imagery by means of a shorter poem that preceded it by a year; here it is in the brilliant Merwin/Brown version:

I was washing outside in the darkness,  
the sky burning with rough stars,  
and the starlight salt on an axe-blade.  
The cold overflows the barrel.

The gate's locked,  
the land's grim as its conscience.  
I don't think they'll find the new weaving,  
finer than truth, anywhere.

Star-salt is melting in the barrel,  
icy water is turning blacker,  
death's growing purer, misfortune saltier,  
the earth's moving closer to truth and to dread.

The imagery here is clear and, I think, marked by this poet's greatness. Mandelstam is characterizing his sense of the changed



and changing world of the Russian revolution and the twentieth century with details drawn from peasant life, from the rugged Russian winter, from the star/salt collocation that gives us heaven and earth, the dailiness of life and its spiritual and fatal meanings. The speaker is most confident when reporting his experiences and sensations; as he turns to speculation he is less sure of himself and the language and meaning of the poem waver. The last two lines of the second and third stanzas present us with whatever difficulty the poem can be said to pose (and it's one of the poet's clearest and most straightforward performances). Here Meares's version may be helpful. He translates lines 7-8 as "Fresh canvas is a purer base for truth / Than you're likely to find elsewhere," and lines 10-12 as "The freezing water is blacker, / Death cleaner, misfortune more bitter, / And the earth, though grimmer, is just." James Greene, who omits the middle stanza, renders the final line as "The earth more veracious, more awful." The differences among the versions suggest not so much that one is right and the others wrong as that there's a good deal of ambiguity, a leeway, in the original. The speaker wants to affirm the changes in his world, despite its iciness and bitterness, and in line with its beautiful austerity, but he is unsure of himself as a prophet: Meares has decided that he shades toward the hopeful; Merwin and Brown have shaded him toward the pessimistic. Greene just doesn't manage to make his adjectives work, separately or together. But from the three versions we can, I suspect, get a pretty fair sense of the tone and meaning of this poem: the poet is finding beauty in the simple things of his world, starlight, rain-barrel, axe-blade, a chance to wash in uncomfortable but invigorating conditions, but he is also finding fear and uncertainty. Something terrible is ahead and he will be swept up into it, like it or not. He is already retrenching in anticipation of it, simplifying his life, his requirements, his images. We can't read this without our own consciousness of the Stalin epigram Mandelstam would write eleven years later, leading to his arrest and eventual death, just as we can't leave out that ossifying social system ("The yard gates are locked up tight / And the earth, in all conscience, is grim" is Meares's version of lines 5 and 6) that would lead to Stalin and

the purges and terrors of the thirties. We know what the poet and speaker were only guessing at. But the poem is not disadvantaged by our historical distance; it continues to take one's breath away with its simplicity, brevity and beauty.

I think of "To some, winter . . ." as a companion piece. The poet has smuggled favorite images across from one poem to the next, as he loved to do, and he has greatly expanded the peasant setting, crossed with the meditation on change and the impending sense of terror. This is like a painting the other poem was a sketch for; it brims with life and goes all over the place, tonally. We start with the relativities of what winter means, according to your wealth and station. Meares's note tells us that "blue-eyed punch" refers to the flames on the surface of punch, a cozy image of winter pleasures. He also notes that "arak" is an anise-based spirit in wide use throughout the Levant. I've never quite understood how Merwin/Brown got "nut-stains" out of "arak," but Greene has "nuts" in his first line too (the whole of which reads "Winter — to some — is a blue sky of steaming wine and nuts," an unfortunate muddle of the original as far as I can see), so "arak" must have some undertone or association involving nuts or nut-stains, unless Greene just borrowed from Merwin and Brown. In any case, the sense of what winter means evolves from the pleasant associations of the first two lines to the separation of heaven and earth in the next two, the brutal orders that come down from the high, salty stars and must suffice in the smoky huts where peasants are trying to keep warm. This evolution, or devolution, brings us in the second stanza to the world of the speaker, who sounds as though he may once have known the world of flaming punch, cinnamon-scented wine, and arak, but who now is reduced to picking his way around a barnyard ("the warm droppings of a few hens" is Merwin/Brown's felicitous version of what I have made a little more colloquial and pungent) and finding his small consolations in the warmth of animals. The phrase that interrupts the last two lines of the second quatrain seems to be untranslatable; none of the versions (Meares: "my need for care's so great"; Greene: "for cares I need"; McDuff: "so much I need the care"; Merwin/Brown: "For life, for life and



care") works very well in English, though the sense is fairly clear. I've dodged the issue somewhat by dropping the word "care," but I think my choice makes sense for the rest of the poem. The match image is what makes this stanza finish with a flourish. Merwin/Brown's "kitchen match" is mighty tempting, given the sound and clarity (you can feel it between your fingers), but "lighted" is apparently closer to the literal.

The speaker portrays himself almost as a kind of village idiot, a Gimpel the fool, with his empty bowl or pot and his ears attuned to the stars. Through the years when I had only the Merwin/Brown version to look at I didn't understand the second half of the third stanza. Theirs reads "I can't help loving through unfledged bird skin / the yellow of grass, warmth of the black earth." The image simply puzzled me and I passed on. I now think — maybe I'm simple-minded — that Mandelstam's speaker is talking about looking at the snow on the ground, associating it with downy feathers, and loving the grass and earth it is obscuring. If I'm right, "unfledged bird skin" is not helpful, and "wretched feather-down" (Meares) or "pitiful plumage" (Greene), while none too felicitous, are better guides to what Mandelstam is up to, leaving McDuff's "pathetic haze" no help whatsoever. I may be wrong about the import of this image, but my version represents my sense of what works best and what fits in with the preceding and following images.

I won't continue to rehearse the differences among the translators, simply say that I think the fourth stanza reiterates the simple pleasures associated with farm work, a life close to the soil, affirming them as appropriate to a time of uncertainty about the future. We have pastoral, here, if you like, and it is moving and effective. The fifth stanza reiterates the sense of wanting to be out of the world of political aspirations and goes back to its opening affirmation of hard times and what they mean. In both stanzas, widely divergent readings are possible, but the fundamental sense of each and of the poem's direction seems reasonably clear.

The last stanza seems to me the poem's particular triumph. The speaker imagines a romantic quest, a Diogenes-like journey cast in folklore images appropriate to the peasant world he has



been occupying. He would like to set off on his adventures, following where his dog leads, and to arrive where prophecy is possible, his gift of a rooster to be bartered, presumably, for a clearer sense of the future, but he can only dream about setting out. Snow-blindness, a winter too brutal and prolonged, leaves him imagining his quest rather than undertaking it. Even this imagining, however, gives the poem a life and surge before it settles down into its woeful and resigned recognition. The tonal changes I cited earlier are very evident here, and I scarcely need to itemize them. The whole bucolic dream is lit with magic for a moment and then ruefully snuffed out. The reality of winter, which is the reality of the historical change the poet is struggling to survive in, is wryly acknowledged and the poem, for a moment, defies it and bests it. Winter is a season; you place it among the cycles of nature that include its opposite states. The snow melts. The cold goes away. Flowers bloom and the sheep are let out to pasture. All these meanings are deepened by what happened subsequently. The winter got worse, much worse, and then it began to relent. Some poems are left behind by history, others are enhanced by it. Events of heartening change are occurring daily in Mandelstam's Russia as I write this in August, 1991. The miracle of survival, not the poet but the poems, continues to enchant and mystify us.

## THE AGE

My animal, my age, who will ever be able  
to look into your eyes?  
Who will ever glue back together the vertebrae  
of two centuries with his blood?  
Blood the maker gushes  
from the throats of the things of earth.  
Already the hanger-on is trembling  
on the sills of days to come.

Blood the maker gushes  
from the throats of the things of earth  
and flings onto a beach like a burning fish  
a hot sand of sea-bones,  
and down from the high bird-net,  
out of the wet blocks of sky  
it pours, pours, heedlessly  
over your death-wound.

Only a metal the flute has mended  
will link up the strings of days  
until a time is torn out of jail  
and the world starts new.  
The age is rocking the wave  
with human grief  
to a golden beat, and an adder  
is breathing in time with it in the grass.

The buds will go on swelling,  
the rush of green will explode,  
but your spine has been shattered,  
my splendid derelict, my age.

Cruel and feeble, you'll look back  
with the smile of a half-wit:  
an animal that could run once,  
staring at his own tracks.

1923, 1936

*translated by Clarence Brown and W. S. Merwin*

## THE TIME VS. THE AGE

According to Mandelstam's essay "Talking about Dante," the poet's journey from conceptualizing a poem to instilling it in language is like crossing a river on foot: "One has to run across the whole width of the river, jammed with mobile Chinese junks sailing in various directions. This is how the meaning of poetic speech is created. Its route cannot be reconstructed by interrogating the boatmen: they will not tell how and why we were leaping from junk to junk" (Brown/Hughes translation). The aim of investigating the poem, then, isn't to discover how the poet worked — we want only to catch what he saw in the moment of creation.

I've chosen this Mandelstam poem because it seems to me to be one of the best examples of his way of seeing, of reconstructing things, which is linked, I think, to his attack on the Symbolists and to "the rehabilitation of the teapot," of everyday life and ordinary things in his poetry. At the same time, it's important to recognize the dynamic, visionary character of the world he creates. Lamarck, biology, chemistry, physics, geology — these are the external milestones along Mandelstam's way. But if, reading his poems, we're sometimes reminded of an anatomy lesson, we shouldn't fail to notice that what takes place here isn't the usual dissection: we witness the vivisection of an organism that grows, matures, gets old, and dies in a single metaphor or series of metaphors. Some of Mandelstam's poems are simply synchronic holograms where time becomes history, where one state is the result of previous states and a function of future ones, but where the person playing this colorful drama is a man who tries to grasp the whole of time through the medium of natural history. The poem, then, isn't a story someone's telling us: the instruments of the poet's language weren't ready before he started his difficult tour — he had to invent them while making his way.

The central image of "The Age" is an animal "symbolizing" (a very imprecise term for this method of writing when one thing for a time in fact becomes another) the age, the time in history, but simultaneously it's a living creature passing through it. Surely "my age" was for Mandelstam the nineteenth century, the epoch



of tzarism, but also of accustomed, generally accepted humanity of some range, when even political prisoners could learn German while confined in jail, and when a brother of the tzar's assassin was peacefully allowed to study at a university — something unthinkable under the regime of a new humanity called Stalinism. At the beginning of the thirties Mandelstam said to his wife Nadezhda, according to her memoirs: "If there ever was a golden age, it was in the nineteenth century. We just failed to notice it."

But in "The Age" we're still at the beginning of the twenties. Imagine a man like Mandelstam in those times, a highly cultivated intellectual turned, besides to the natural sciences, mostly to history, Greek and Roman classics, and Dante, a man that designated himself "the last Christian-Hellenistic poet of Russia," imagine such a man in his "Buddhist Moscow" where the great "Assyrian" Stalin rules, speaking about a hanger-on, a parasite "trembling / on the sills of days to come"! He must have felt himself not a champion of the humanity which is the only condition that can give the possibility of a real human life and fate (which he in fact was), but an anachronism, a living relic of the dead age, a member of an ancient, cultivated civilization among the crowd of barbarians whose challenge nevertheless bore the noble names of Revolution, Liberation, Freedom. Even after his first return from jail in 1936, Mandelstam said he wanted to be united with the majority, that he was afraid of remaining outside the revolution and of missing just because of short-sightedness those grand acts taking place before his eyes. "The decisive factor in the taming of Russian intellectuals," Nadezhda Mandelstam quotes her brother as saying, "was neither fear nor corruption — though both were present — but the fact that nobody wanted to abandon the word 'revolution.' "

Revolution meant a new world, new order, new, new — in fact this word was a magic formula of the time, a dangerous formula smelling of capital punishment and absolutism. Thanks to this word the age, when "touched, answered 'yes' and 'no' / as a child answers / 'I'll give you the apple,' or 'I won't give you the apple,' " Mandelstam wrote in the 1923 poem "He Who Finds a

Horseshoe." No other answers were possible. "New" was a black-mailer's word: either you go along or you're a living corpse.

We find it twice in "The Age" (though this is obscured in the Merwin/Brown translation): "the sills of the new days" in the first stanza and "the new world" in the third. But there's nothing like the crucial "Yes" said to revolution in the 1918 poem that symptomatically begins "Let us praise the twilight of freedom, brothers, / the great year of twilight!": "But what can we lose if we try one / groaning, wide, ungainly sweep of the rudder?" In 1922 the helmsman's direction is already clear — he steers the ship directly to the altar where the theme of life is to be sacrificed. And in the last stanza from the version of 1923 (which became the second stanza when Mandelstam revised the poem in 1936 but fits better, I think, as the very end of the poem) "blood the maker . . . flings onto a beach . . . a hot sand of sea-bones." The final image is that of total destruction and indifference, the only results of the brave new age: nothing is left uncertain now. Everything is almost finished.

We meet Mandelstam's animal age once more in the poem that follows "The Age" chronologically, "He Who Finds a Horseshoe," but from a different point of view: "Children play jacks with bits of animals' backbones. / The frail tally of our age is almost done. / For what there was, thank you. / For my part, I made mistakes, got lost, / came out wrong. The age clanged like a golden ball, / hollow, seamless, held by no one."

In spite of the difference, something important still remains, something that enables Mandelstam to say: "What I'm saying now isn't said by me. / It's dug out of the ground like grains of petrified wheat." We may believe him, but nevertheless we ask: Who is the man who can say this? How can he be sure? How can he do this? But no explanations are possible. With Mandelstam, we find ourselves in a building constructed from inside: nature and architecture become a jail, and the chief builder is then proclaimed the first prisoner. Answering our question would be the same as trying to express Heisenberg's principle of uncertainty from inside a system, which is a contradiction: this principle makes

sense if and only if formulated by an observer located outside the system. This is pure objectivity, and nobody knows who or what objectified it before our eyes. The poet-architect forgot to be a god for awhile: he didn't even want to be one. And on the other side, the sky he sees from his position inside the future building lacks the emptiness, the abyss, which only a subject completely lost under the heavens could catch a glimpse of. Mandelstam's confidence in nature was too great: it was not Giordano Bruno who ought to be celebrated, but Gilgamesh and his long, long journey in search of the flower of immortality. But in such a case we could never see that animal, the living architecture of the age — what would remain in our hands would be only the strange, foreign smell of time.



## BLACK EARTH

Manured, blackened, worked to a fine tilth, combed  
like a stallion's mane, stroked under the wide air,  
all the loosened ridges cast up in a single choir,  
the damp crumbs of my earth and my freedom!

In the first days of plowing it's so black it looks blue.  
Here the labor without tools begins.  
A thousand mounds of rumor plowed open — I see  
the limits of this have no limits.

Yet the earth's a mistake, the back of an axe;  
fall at her feet, she won't notice.  
She pricks up our ears with her rotting flute,  
freezes them with the wood-winds of her morning.

How good the fat earth feels on the plowshare.  
How still the steppe, turned up to April.  
Salutations, black earth. Courage. Keep the eye wide.  
Be the dark speech of silence laboring.

Voronezh. April 1935  
*translated by Clarence Brown and W. S. Merwin*

## THE SPEECH OF SILENCE LABORING

Long before speaking and not speaking became political issues for Osip Mandelstam, a complex and sometimes paradoxical play of sound and silence, speech and music informed his work.

From "Silentium," a poem in his first book: "May my lips find / primordial muteness, / like a crystalline note." And: "word, turn back into music."

From "The Word and Culture," a 1921 essay: "The poem lives through an inner image, that ringing mold of form which anticipates the written poem. There is not yet a single word, but the poem can already be heard. This is the sound of the inner image, this is the poet's ear touching it."

From "He Who Finds a Horseshoe," a long poem of 1923:

Where to start?  
Everything cracks and shakes.  
The air trembles with similes.  
No one word's better than another;  
the earth moans with metaphors . . . .

The fifth stanza, where air is like water "with wheels moving in it, and horses shying, / And Neaera's damp black earth," concludes: "The air is as deeply mingled as the earth; / you can't get out of it, and it's hard to get in."

It's difficult to "get in" here, partly because it's a difficult time: the "age" has begun to clang "like a golden ball, / hollow, seamless, held by no one." That sound "is still ringing, though what caused it has gone"; similarly, though a stallion lies in the dust, "the tight arch of his neck recalls / the stretched legs racing," and "human lips / that have no more to say / keep the shape of the last word they said."

Twelve years later, Mandelstam was exiled for having said too much. The first of the three notebooks he was to fill with poems during his exile in Voronezh opens with "Black Earth."

It's possible to see, in the first stanza of "Black Earth," a condensed and vitalized version of some of the Horseshoe poem's

"inner images." Here, though, the earth does not "moan" with metaphors but delivers them up, indeed becomes them: how the ploughed earth comes to embody horse and then choir is not a simple (or simply) metaphorical matter, but the motion implicit in one and the music explicit in the other suggest, even before the astonishing fourth line, an identification between poet and earth. *Astonishing* because, of course, "my earth" which is also "my freedom" is the land of Mandelstam's exile.

In the second stanza, language emerges from the ploughing, succeeding music. The "thousand mounds" of rumor/language/words are reminiscent of the earth's metaphors in the Horseshoe poem, except that here the excavated language frees rather than frustrates, allowing the poet to discover within his limits/bounds/surroundings something without limits. (I'm referring, here, to three translations; Brown and Merwin's, while the most poetically satisfying, is unique in using "rumor" for what Jane Gary Harris identifies as a neologism and translates as "ploughed-up words.")

There *were* of course limits, and poems written later the same month shrink the black earth of this poem to "my shoe-size in earth with bars around it" (#307) and locate in it the grave where the poet lies "with my lips moving" (#305). Even here the earth is, in the third stanza, "a mistake, the back of an axe"; it does not respond to the poet, whose posthumous voice may be suggested by the "rotting flute" which replaces the choir of the first stanza.

But the poet is very much alive in the last stanza of "Black Earth." If the ploughed earth gives up its music and then its speech in the first part of the poem, in the end it is the poet who offers language and encouragement to the earth. His address echoes the end of "The Twilight of Freedom" (1918), a poem which only partially resolves its ambivalent stance toward the Revolution with "Courage, / brothers, as the cleft sea falls back from our plow. . . ." In "Black Earth," ambivalence, or at least complexity, is certainly apparent in the paradoxical "dark speech of silence laboring": in a poem written from exile, the line resonates beyond the fact of the earth's silence, beyond the intricacies of Mandelstam's aesthetics.

But those aesthetics aren't irrelevant here, for poet or for reader, and the necessity of reading in translation may have the accidental virtue of bringing us closer to "the ringing mold of form which anticipates the written poem" than the original might do. We can, of course, pay primary attention to the music as well as the words of Brown and Merwin (or Harris, or James Greene); we can read a translation as if it were a new poem. But it is also possible to read beneath the translated words, into the "black earth" of them, so to speak.

From "The Word and Culture" again: "Poetry is the plough that turns up time in such a way that the abyssal strata of time, its black earth, appear on the surface."

And from a 1937 Voronezh poem: "The people need poetry that will be their own secret / to keep them awake forever" (#355).  
Courage, reader, Keep the eye wide.



I'm in a lion's trench, plunged in a fort,  
And sinking lower, lower, lower,  
Under the yeast shower of these sounds:  
More trenchant than lions, more potent than the Pentateuch.

How close your summons:  
Keener than commandments of childbirth, firstlings — ,  
Like strings of pearls at the bottom of the sea  
Or meek baskets borne by Gauguin's mistresses.

Motherland of chastening songs, approach,  
With the declivities deepening in your voice! — O primal mother,  
The shy-sweet icon-faces of *our* daughters  
Are not worth your little finger.

My time is still unbounded.  
And I have accompanied the rapture of the universe  
As muted organ pipes  
Accompany a woman's voice.

1937

*translated by James Greene*

## THE BEAUTY OF SOUND

I love this poem very much. It amounts to a balance of opposites, an arch grounded at both foundations, a bird with two long wings. How to say this? With the full force of masculine thought he dedicates the poem to female song. Flying up into the air, he points to the earth; making houses out of sawn boards he points to the space inside; adopting the high architectural disciplines of male culture, he encloses in it a vision of an utterly female universe.

He himself is a lion, sharp-clawed, authoritative as the first five books of the Hebrew Bible, but he feels all these sounds that make the bread rise coming down.

This love of sounds that shower down from the dome belongs to oral culture rather than the newer written culture. The speaker offers the sounds from the center of a community, aware as he speaks of all those around him or her, and has no particular "line" to follow. He is following the lines of the dome above him, and the people dome around him. It is a circle:

Like strings of pearls at the bottom of the sea  
Or meek baskets borne by Gauguin's mistresses.

It isn't Russia, the motherland, that calls to him, but this impalpable, hearable, yin, ear-shaped motherland of sounds, whose magnificence makes our own lives, even when endangered by Fascism, seem unimportant by comparison.

The shy-sweet icon-faces of *our* daughters  
Are not worth your little finger.

How beautiful it is when a man can hold, as Mandelstam did, Greece and Rome, and their history, in honor, hold the Penta-teuch in honor, hold great Western painters such as Gauguin in honor, and then kneel to Sophia and Aphrodite, and give all of his work to the female harmony underlying all.

THE WALL IN THE CORNER BY THE STAIRS

The wall  
covered with the stucco  
of oblivion,  
a bit slanted,  
somewhat invisible  
in the glassy eye  
of the mundane.

Coarse plaster,  
a vertical burying ground of rhizopods,  
grains of sand  
of Mathias Braun, Baroque painter, and  
husks of Celtic germs.

A thin latex coating and a cobweb,  
a laurel wreath  
on the neck of last year's gnat  
trembling in the draft  
like a mummy of our  
forever distant  
love for Helen of Troy.

A crack like  
a dried-up barge-puller's river,  
a hole left by a nail,  
the mouth of the volcano  
Empedocles jumped into,  
big as a sigh,  
the hollow brain of a mite,  
the little mouth of a prince  
open in wonder  
at the dry-handedness  
of our memory.

Paintings on walls.  
A framed Saroyan. A framed Beckett.  
A framed Breughel.  
Mummy, when she was twenty, framed,  
me, when I was six, framed,

all  
dead  
for ages.

All identical with the wall.



## THE END OF THE WEEK

Of course it's all based  
on a timetable, sometimes valid  
Monday to Friday, sometimes on Saturday,  
very rarely on Sunday (when He rested  
from all His labors),

and we carry it in a forgotten pocket  
so we usually miss the train.

But we'll get there anyway.

It will be Sunday again, the day of withered songs.  
On the first floor, by the window without curtains,  
a little girl in a red dress will stand  
and wait.

In the Spanish square they'll be burning  
eighteen Jewish marranos  
in honor of the wedding of Maria Luisa and Carlos.

But we won't even stop  
and will go home the back way,  
deep in thought.

*translated by Dana Hábová and David Young*

CHOOSING AN AUTHOR FOR  
ASSURANCE IN THE NIGHT

I hoped it would be someone  
who, burning through her last mask,  
debuting with the creases earned  
from its petrified pillow,  
would show me how  
to live persistently.  
Reject (I asked) the hollow protection  
of your headdress,  
mystagogue, inspiritor,  
its copper  
wires and antelope skin,  
its bronze or cam wood or coconut hair.

But I had to turn  
to the lean idol of this Day of the Dead  
compulsive writer in her afterlife,  
whose own fine fittings have slipped.  
She's hung them up with her fencing mesh  
and catcher's grille.

She types:

"I know now  
to be plain, with an occasional seed  
leafing out from my sutures.

I am bony as a bridge,  
a bare letter-by-letter pusher,

assembled in angles  
to span.

Death makes me direct,  
with a little ornamental nonsense  
of elbows and knees,  
if you call this death:  
my twaddle still counsels  
though I have no ears to hook a mask on.

‘Carver, coppersmith, make me a disguise,’  
you won’t hear me saying.  
My typing fingers fly  
up to my face

like a plunging pianist’s.  
Accurate, flexible, but not bravura.  
So for the sacred ritual  
around the fire  
I will not be chosen;  
to chant  
one needs the scored shell of an artist,  
the scarifications  
of a decorator to look out through,  
pod eyes, tube eyes,  
to breathe through, to  
tug an audience through with

innuendo, wooden winks.  
Now, I like my skull  
but it won’t get me the priestesshood.  
I like my skull;  
it got me here.”

And here —  
close beside me.  
The blood is running around in my hand  
to keep up with her messages  
from,  
it feels like,  
one of those colossal stones  
that throw starlight.

THE ISLAND

She finds herself moving toward islands:  
Rain-soaked dog standing in the street,  
A lover, an attic room. The child  
Who will not play, or the child who plays hardest.  
Even the villain. Or at night her hand  
Between her legs. Always, their company: the last  
Channel before broadcast hiss, the one window  
Across the valley that burns through dark.

She thinks: I am getting worse, older, lighter.  
She wonders if the body has begun its betrayal;  
Fear starts making deals. People want to talk,  
Shake the ice in their glasses. She leans toward  
The single glance, single word, remembers  
Once floating as far as she could to get out  
To the deep, to the scary point, to last in a row.  
Now arrangements are made in airplanes  
Overhead; the islands mapped, or converted,

And always someone has heard of them.  
They are places to make plans for, knowing  
You will go back. Places where the dream  
Is more important than the meaning. She leans,  
And the desire for movement feels different and dangerous.  
Leans toward the dark of a lover's eyes, lifts herself  
Out of the cold water and walks in. Island: an open mouth,  
One tree in a field, or the place her hand covers.  
And when she finally begins to talk she's never sure  
How she got there, what to leave in, what to leave out.



CORRELATIVES OF PAIN

Don't think about it, how strange it is  
to be kneeling in the snow, holding on  
to a fence post bare-handed,  
so cold it burns. You're such a good girl.  
And won't the sixth-graders be impressed?  
See how long you can hold on —  
count, sing, do anything . . .

*A my name is An—gel—ine  
my hus—band's name is Al.  
We live in Al—la—bama  
and we sell ap—ples!*

*B my name is Bet—ty  
my hus—band's name is Bill.  
We live in Bora Bora  
and we sell Bi—bles!*

*C my name is Cath—thy  
my hus—band's name is Cal.  
We live in Cal—cut—ta  
and we sell Chry—slers!*

So cold, so cold. Close your eyes, keep going.  
Going to Z, going to sleep. What starts with Z?  
Zanzibar? Who can you be  
with a Z-name? Zelda? ZaZu? Zahriel?

*Z my name is Zah—riel  
my hus—band's name is . . . Xavier!!!  
We live in Zan—zi—bar  
and we sell zebras!!!*

Good girl. Good girl. Good girl.

Good girl,  
which are the chief creatures of God?

*The chief creatures of God are angels  
and men, Sister.*

No women. No good girls.

*Why, Sister?*

Because of the one with seventeen names —  
tell me now what angels are.

*Angels are spirits without bodies.  
Can they feel the cold?  
Do their knees hurt?  
I want to be an angel.  
Angels on horseback.  
Horseback, see the crack.  
Try and break your mother's back.  
My mother told me to be  
the very best one  
and I pick you.*

Why did God make you?

*Because He loves me.*

It hurts. It hurts. I can't do this anymore.  
Where is everyone?

*Gone, gone, gone to class,  
you're a donkey, you're an ass.*

But I won! I won! I held on longer,  
I'm stronger than anyone.

\* \* \* \* \*

See how long you can hold on —  
all they taught you printed on a holy card:  
St. Dymphna, patron saint of madness,  
pray for us.

And what if she whispered back?  
What if a softness called out:  
*pray for me,*  
*there is no recourse?*

Then to whom would I pray?  
And what do we do with these stories?  
And with the clothing,

worn by those who believed mightily,  
snipped by cunning tailors  
into racks of blessings,  
enough for all of us to tuck  
into our blouses and shirts?

These scapulars, these stories —  
that the stillborn never become angels  
that angels are spirits without bodies  
that the fallen are among us  
that you have your own guardian angel,  
for whom you should make room in your seat . . .  
How do we close our eyes to all of that?

\* \* \* \* \*

The winds of Sicily in her throat, Lucia begins to pray  
for me in Grandmother's green kitchen.  
I'm nine, with a headache, being checked for the *malocchio*.

Lucia performs an inverted baptism,  
a shallow bowl of water in her lap.  
The trick is to form an unwavering eye of oil.  
She carefully adds a drop,  
then another, and another . . .  
they disperse wildly, will not bind in an eye.  
The family holds hands, their voices bound in prayer.  
And all this time I'm standing before the bowl,

prayers floating around my head, legs aching.  
I'm praying for the whole eye.  
It's what I'm told to do. When I look up,  
my parents smile down at an oily eye,  
like the dead round eye of a fish.

Applause. And Grandmother to Lucia:  
*Have a canoli, have a cup-a coffee.*

My head still pounds, but I am proud.  
Such a good girl. Good girl. Good girl!  
There's laughter in the kitchen now,  
a cold wave I catch, rocking  
back and forth on the porch,  
fingering the scapular around my neck.

*Make sure she keep some garlic on her,*  
Lucia says, leaving the house,  
making the sign of the cross, trailing water.  
*Lucia will be a saint someday,* I whisper.

\* \* \* \* \*



Angels are forgotten till we need them  
Angels are fallen till we pick them up  
The magnetic field of angels  
Angels following their attractions

Negative or positive  
Left or right  
Up or down  
You or me  
Committees of angels  
Listen to Lucia whisper to Beatrice  
Look how the line of intercession works  
Listen to Rilke cry out above the sea to no particular angel,  
    yet he knows that *every single angel is terrible*  
Look how we all sit in our chairs  
Look at the absence  
Look what we've carried on our shoulders all these years

DEPICTION OF CHILDHOOD

*After Picasso*

It is the little girl  
guiding the minotaur  
with her free hand —  
that devourer

and all the terror he's accustomed to  
effortlessly emanating,  
his ability to paralyze  
merely by becoming present,

entranced somehow, and transformed  
into a bewildered  
and who knows, grateful  
gentleness . . .

and with the other hand  
lifting her lamp.

## THE LATE LATE SHOW

Undressing, after working all night,  
the last thing I see is the room

in the house next door.

At 4 in the morning, a dark room

filled with that flickering  
blue

so familiar, almost maternal  
if you were born

in my generation:  
*this* light

so small, reassuring you  
that the world is still there

filled with friendly and beautiful people, people  
who would like to give you helpful products —

adoring families —  
funny Nazis . . .

Undressing, the  
last thing I will see.

## REUNION

*I brood on the uselessness of letters.*

*Tu Fu*

Movement of the hour hand, dilating  
of the rose . . .  
Once I could write those.  
What am I? A skull

biting its fingernails, a no one  
with nowhere to be  
consulting his watch,  
a country music station left on quietly

all night, the motel door left open  
to Wheeling's rainy main street, the river  
and wind  
and every whiskey-breath

ghost in the family —  
left open,  
old man,  
for you.



THREE WALKS OF NEAR SUICIDE WITH TRAKL

*Horse*

The snow isn't coming this year.  
More afternoons on the dirt road  
wandering from home.  
November: young Trakl walking in the brown garden.  
Past the splintering gazebo and out,  
walks out to the welcoming road  
and the steady rows of skeletal birches . . .  
Thinks: this is how we walk in autumn,  
black shoes tonguing up dust  
and the heart taking small pins of gray light.  
Young Georg standing roadside,  
touching the coal rock  
tucked hard in  
the sewn pocket  
*what burns at home has no match in this world.*  
The aspens pawn the last of their tiny bronze trays.  
A horse and its man are coming,  
the wind cold, the horse steaming,  
the boy trembling slightly and inching out into the road.

*Locomotive*

Winter, the stone-cutters  
pedaling home empty-handed.  
Young Georg sitting on the narrow tracks  
watching them through trees,  
albumen portrait of his father  
becoming creased in the left hand,  
white lines blooming on the neck.  
He's listening to the even give and take  
of wind and reed,  
the world and its steady line.  
Thinks, autumn has brought us little,  
the flight of the thickets  
from beneath the blessing trees  
and darkness as an earlier guest each day.

*Waking you feel the bitterness of the world . . .*  
Father and his business of nails  
*. . . your unredeemed guilt.*  
the right diameter of pain for every job!  
The slow pour of dusk fades the print in the hand,  
the stone-cutters gone home for soup,  
the first stars tacking the black above.  
*Whose voice outside the body, your own?*  
Faint metal echoes now rise from the tracks,  
smoke coming slow around the arbor bend  
and the soft locomotive out of the blue . . .

*Lake*

Trakl making his way through the world.  
Late March, the fields not yet green and somehow pre-Morse,  
winter and its slow, blue chew.  
The deer are already up and feeding,  
the sun's talk of warmth coming clean . . . .  
The cigarette dip and dull blaze of landscape.

*For a time I was followed  
by the muttering and singing,  
speechless!*

Last night, Georg drunk and staggering home through the  
aspens

accusing the elderly the small homes the brown hills,  
today walking with his round crimson stare  
toward the dark blue magnet of lake —  
and *why not?* — a wade fully-clothed.

It will be some time before water  
fingers skin beneath his collar,  
gently lifts the hat off his head.

This is the morning of the inspector  
walking his well-groomed dog farther than usual,  
of the familiar hat on the low horizon of water. . . .

He'll walk the boy home  
over every meal of cabbage and potatoes,  
see the thin lips slightly blue and curved,  
as if the boy had heard something.

## TRAKL, IN CHARGE OF WOUNDED

*Grodek, August 1914*

Enough. To sit here with this ache  
for my head, beneath these poplars  
and wind fingering the burnt leaves.  
There are peasants dangling in the trees  
overhead and thunderheads building  
out west. A small child ran past  
only an hour ago, his body a grace  
unbound by pack or gun.  
Smooth bone and an easy  
ligament glide.  
I yelled to him  
    tell me I am not mad!  
he kept running.  
What does a pharmacist know?

\* \* \*

Branch-creak and soiled burlap,  
the dead up above  
hung on suspicion.  
Dear, dear Austria,  
betrayal is a black sore on the tongue.  
My country lies dying in a red barn.  
Ninety men going  
the red-brown way of blood,  
agony in the haylofts,  
and joy a small powder for the veins.

\* \* \*

As if I didn't know this:  
the gunner at my side  
had beautiful golden hair  
edging under his charcoal hat.



What a distraction amid smoke,  
gunning for Russians,  
and then I was laughing,  
hysterically, waiting for the round  
to finish, to run my fingers  
through his hair.  
As if I didn't know this.

\* \* \*

Out of the barn for an opium dip  
under the sleek poplars,  
afterthoughts hanging  
in their poor clothes.  
He was my last patient,  
sputtering in a hayloft,  
his uniform dark on pale straw,  
neck half-skin, half-crimson,  
his fingers out to me  
and my job to take them.

Head in my lap,  
I listened to him gurgle  
about chess with a lover in Vienna,  
dipping one finger  
in the soft red edge  
where his neck once began,  
watching him blink.

\* \* \*

He asked if I'd dreamt  
anything since the retreat.  
I said no, nothing.

Now there's this child,  
and my idiot dream  
is to run like him  
carrying a blue world  
through nothing.

BLAISE PASCAL LIP-SYNCS THE VOID

It's not good to be complete.

It's not good to be concupiscent,

caught as we are

Between a the and a the,

Neither of which we know and neither of which knows us.

It's not good to be sewn shut.

There's change and succession in all things, Pascal contends,

But inconstancy, boredom and anxiety condition our days.

Neither will wash for him, though,

since nature is corrupt.

That's why we love it.

That's why we take it, unwinnowed,

Willingly into our hearts.

December. Four p.m.

Chardonnay-colored light-slant

Lug weight in the boned trees.

Squirrel dead on the tarmac.

Boom-boxing Big Foot pick-up trucks

Hustle down Locust,

light pomegranate pink grapefruit then blood.

We take it into our hearts.

## WINTER-WORSHIP

Mother of Darkness, Our Lady,  
Suffer our supplications,

our hurts come unto you.

Hear us from absence your dwelling place,  
Whose ear we plead for.

End us our outstay.

Where darkness is light, what can the dark be,

whose eye is single,

Whose body is filled with splendor

In winter,

inside the snowflake, inside the crystal of ice

Hung like Jerusalem from the tree.

January, rain-wind and sleet-wind,

Snow pimpled and pock-marked,

half slush-hearted, half brocade,

Under your noon-dimmed day watch,

Whose alcove we harbor in,

whose waters are beaded and cold.

*A journey's a fragment of Hell,*

one inch or a thousand miles.

Darken our disbelief, dog our steps.

Inset our eyesight,

Radiance, loom and sting,

whose ashes rise from the flames.



DEEP WINTER

*Pond*

The world was lost between four  
and five — no sound.  
Snow like a mask.

Wind off the icy pond  
ran at me —  
shield first, then the sword.

Rumbling . . .  
a crack opens all the way across.

*Outcries*

A drunk in a tattered coat staggers into  
the traffic, yells "I'm a frozen man!  
Do you want to see a frozen man?"

A friend describes his marriage: the Vietnam War.  
When he said the glass turned to flame, he meant  
Did you see it too. Too separate to ask.

Father shouts on the phone: "All wars are  
religious!" (Not the ones in our family . . .)

Dan cries out in sleep, waking us — "A man  
was here — a stranger in a dark cloak." It's only  
our own son, back from Morocco, home for dinner.

*Orchard*

Norway maples guard the road —  
white snowstripes down their north sides.

And here one appletree, recently doctored,  
resembles an old actress.  
Scraggly-haired, stoic,  
she knows the ravages of time.

Another, arms akimbo, makes gestures  
of friendship to the new house.

And the near one, orientalized, requires,  
beneath it, a Chinese sage.

How I love this little orchard of the mind,  
deep winter's coat and antidote —

and the real one too —  
slick black trunks,  
branches bouncing in white wind.

Uphill, beyond the slouching grapestick fence,  
boughs of the hemlock lift and fall —  
wings of a huge wild bird —  
the last of its species — heaving, grounded.

## TWO FACES

A bench at the head of the table  
all of us eating, talking —  
stew, wine  
bread

I must pay for the bread  
twenty-seven cents

Suddenly — too close —  
a face

inside the gourmand — an accountant  
inside the accountant, each time  
the death-kiss

\*

Sometimes it shines toward you  
lights the whole room

The window is nothing  
the sounds of the horns nothing

streetlight and starlight  
are nothing

compared to  
that breathing close by

*I am here with you*

COVER

It's not things in dreams  
don't belong, they do —  
it's we who don't fit,  
punished with innocence.

A past brings us the late quiver  
of lives as they disappeared —  
to this we can look forward  
and the sensation of being alone  
with a sunflashed car cornering  
a morning street.

True — it helps to cooperate,  
recognize there's always something left  
that belongs — the deep viol  
of a lake, stars which seem to stick  
in their orders. Death exaggerates

if you let it — We take  
the parting signals  
of train stations at night,  
reflections running reflections,  
so we might leave ahead of ourselves  
an understanding —  
a dream of a friend, a friend.  
Letters ghost to ghost.



## FLASH

I remember a mirror in the first grade  
bathroom — one day I stared at it, lost,  
and the thought of me  
being inside *and* outside  
made my fists pound the sink  
till the teacher came and lifted me  
back to my seat.

Seems we're doubling  
for several someones. Clumsy spies,  
self-portrait takers  
with seconds to compose ourselves  
for a quick image.

Tenuous births, wandering half here  
a lawn of dry leaves  
gold-specked, veil of bewilderment  
half drawn.

Into valleys comes conflation  
of mist — then fireflies pulse as if  
trying to light all that  
but lighting just themselves.

FALLING WITH LUCIFER

If Adam and Eve  
could find their way home,  
the gray angel at the gate, drowsing,  
leaning on its sword;  
if they threw down their clothing,  
their thighs burnished by the old sun;  
if they willed up the fruit  
into the Tree of Ignorance,  
teased the gartersnake in the rye tufts,  
gave the creatures back their anonymity  
and She sprang back into His side,  
would God draw them back  
from the blue seething earth  
to sit at his throne,  
until they were ready to fall again?

## TALE OF TWO GUITARS

1.

Unlike the piano,  
which takes three recovering alkies  
to grunt it into residence,  
the guitar is air and faith.  
You hold it as you would an infant,  
cradling its fragile neck  
where the six Powers cluster.  
You stroke its swart belly  
as you would please a lover.

2.

Mother, some kids follow the carnival:  
the Tattooed Lady and the Two-Headed Sheep;  
others follow a sunburst or a doubleneck  
down the Six-Way Path.  
I give you another birth.  
That child you planned for pestle, pulpit, podium,  
stadium cracks open his carapace  
and throws his leathers against the motel wall.  
Outside, the stretch limo lowers its eyes,  
and the groupies gently raise the Godhead  
before they take home their overworked hair.  
Yes, mother, his thorax is still downy-haired,  
his eyecups translucent. But you imagine something  
shaped like a cello under the covers,  
the case of Daniels, two lines of nose  
on the varnished bureau. Mother,  
your son is between rock and a hard place.

3.

Behind the Elkshead Inn, father,  
near Colter Bay, your son pours a gourd  
of pump water down his shirt.  
His eyes burn from smoke and stage lights.

Two more sets of C&W; then he can call home  
about the fever and the furnace.

He stands under breath-feathering air  
and ice-far stars, seeing chain-lightning  
behind the mountains, his fretting fingers  
tingling with six string grooves.

Inside, the amp's ready light glows  
through the smoke, Strohs float down the table  
of intermittent passion, now without its song.

The guitar breathes slowly.

The guitar breathes slowly for all of us.



PRIMER

1

On the kitchen table, under  
a dusting of flour, my mother's hands  
pressed pastry into the fluted shell  
with experienced thumbs.

Mustard-plaster, mercurochrome wand,  
blue satin binding of the blanket  
I stroked to sleep,  
soft tar roof where the laundry  
bellied and bleached,  
sky veined with summer lightning:

If we were so happy,  
why weren't we happy?

2

Dreams sink a deep shaft down  
to that first shoe,  
bronzed, immortal.

We looked up at a sky of  
monumental nostrils, grim tilted  
backlit faces.

We learned to shape the letters,  
l's and t's looped and tied, small i's  
fastened by a dot.

When we stood up, our feet reached the ground.

We wiped the kisses from our cheeks with the back of our hands.

I thought I was a grasshopper  
in the eyes of giants.  
My father set his hand on the doorknob,  
slowly, without looking at me;  
my mother lifted her hand, the fingertips  
Hot Coral.  
I thought she was saying Come here.

That's why I kept calling them back: *Look,*  
*look who I've become!*  
But it was too late;  
he had his jacket on, and she  
was smiling at her mouth in the hall mirror.

Now I am huge. This is my  
bunch of keys, my silence, my own  
steep face. These  
are my children, cutting on the dotted lines:  
blunt scissors  
and a terrible patience.

## LISTENING

It's your dream, not mine. That's why  
we're all in one place:  
you, me, your dead wife,  
your mistress, your girlfriend, everyone's  
puzzled children.

We climb on the carousel without speaking.  
Then Lenore is there, with a suitcase.  
So she's back, after all.  
The horses are chipped, forelegs tensed  
for distance,  
stiff tails lifted in an imagined wind.

The children wave, sticky-fingered, in case  
anyone is looking. If they could speak  
they'd say: *Choose*.  
The horses obey the law of the circle.

This is your dream. You wrote it. That's why  
the women lean forward in their stirrups as if  
to kiss each other, and the children  
close their eyes. They're so young,  
aren't they? Your voice  
pauses over this, choosing

where to slow down. It is, after all,  
your dream. Pretty soon  
your wooden horse will grow warm,  
whinny, throw back its head, leap out

into the green. Why are you  
telling me this, suddenly happy,  
tapping the spoon against the spongy  
palm of your hand? Why  
am I leaning forward, listening,  
like one of them?

EEYORE

Because I am my family's reader,  
I'm sounding out  
    Eeyore's lament;  
Grandfather in the rest-home bed  
    delighting

in his donkeyishness twists  
    to move sun-dots  
off his face, grumbling German.  
I'm seven & Winnie-the-Pooh's afraid —  
    under my finger

he's eaten all the honey.  
I read further: Eeyore will have no birthday  
    gift but the licked-out pot!  
Is there a German word back to the honey?  
    The nun who will help him

with his shot twitches one window shade  
    to move the sun  
in dots down to Grandfather's broken hip

then rattles the needle-tray & insulin.  
    This day I stay,  
the book closed on Pooh's cupidity,

    to see the needle part  
of the ceremony in which Eeyore hurts himself  
    for his inability

to process sweetness.  
I'll smell the animal smell in the room  
    when he touches himself with the needle  
& the old-man's-smells  
    in the thrice-changed



sheets earlier men have died in.

Poor Eeyore sewn  
so many times & the self  
still leaks out.

The syringe feathers into its puncture —

I look away when I see red,  
& I won't read further no matter  
how the nun coaxes.

## RAFTING

How many hours long  
the six of us water-  
wet, sitting in wet, wet too

fishy-slick with one another's sweat —  
not erotic, wanting  
only the vague group-self  
Ted first refuses then says gloom too

metastasizes, & grins. Thin  
& all angles  
like coathangers fighting  
under his thin  
flannel shirt, he pulls two-handed

at the knitted cap to show  
by inches he's lost  
all hair to chemo-therapy — it's the head

he says that makes it hard to die  
& in his logic  
gives the cap, sinking, to this stream

that is all argument & white  
haloed rocks.  
Two couples, Job's comforters,

& his wife bumping kapok  
swim vests, we're giddied  
by sun & all day a dramamine-fed

euphoria: low birds  
& river-stone uvulae with the river's song  
louder in them —

the whole raft fabric thrums with it,  
cling-ropes staccato,  
the noise unraveling then miles more

to gravel beds that barely scratch  
the river into ripples.  
Ted, up wobbly at our shoulders, salutes  
the sudden high banks,  
the bird-spattered blackberry

canes, a few duckweed stitches  
holding this brief earth,  
& then we slide midstream  
again into luster,  
bewildered because the sun repeats

oranges in our hands Ted urges  
us to eat, apologizing  
for the concept *thirst*  
at the same time he praises sun.  
Ted's wife chokes

at the orange in her hand flaring  
out of cloudy white pulp;  
it bleeds through her fingers,  
but she chokes down  
all of it, thirsty for her own choking  
not for the orange.

DOING MELAKA

*Air* is water, *minum* for a local thirst, *air puti* for you at the *restoran* or the *stesen servis*. You sweat like no one on the *bus* to the *bank*, where you stand in four lines, two of them wrong. The smell of *durian* is everywhere, and its taste,

said an agent of Victorian empire, like "an oyster custard eaten over a London sewer," the fruit especially prized, says the *Lonely Planet*, when it has passed through the gastrointestinal tract of an elephant. The pink Zeeland brick

of Christ Church shimmers in the heat, the ceremonial mast over Cheng Hoon Teng. You are hungry and thirsty. And though the macadam is international, its lines fresh as rain, in both directions each following car

sidles toward the centerline, the drivers looking ahead, to your terror, as six pull out to pass at once. *Awas* means danger, you decide from the skull and crossbones on the road signs, but the recurrent *Kotor?* won't yield

to cognates or deduction. The driver drops his *pasar*, the innkeeper his Hokkien, the jeweler his Tamil, and now the waiter at the bar cuts short his talk in what you've heard is perfect sixteenth century Portuguese to serve you

under the Coca-Cola awnings looking out over the Straits.



GOING TO KNOCK

Long before he took me there  
all the way on the train  
with Paddy Clohessy talking  
about the county team,  
calf prices that spring,  
cows giving the best milk,  
(we knew them all by name),  
their conversation mellowed

to an old whiskey smell  
I used to take down  
the tiny glass basilica  
from the white mantelpiece  
in my parents' bedroom  
and shake the water inside,  
to watch snowflakes falling  
in a blizzard on shoulders

of men and women doing  
a pilgrimage for sins,  
and stand still in the room  
when the electric light  
blinked and dimmed —  
the moment of apparition —  
hearing only an ocean  
in the needles of a pine,

knowing it was dark  
outside by starlings  
rummaging in eaves of the barn,  
and the tick of a yard-light  
coming on was my mother  
going out to close the hens,  
half of them asleep on their perch  
in the warm dung of a shed.

CANAAN

1

And we grazed in the first ridges  
behind the Piedmont, toward the uttermost  
part of the South creek. Lo,

wood smoke weaves ribbons  
through fall days and the sun  
skitters on tin roofs

like fat in a skillet. Here,  
even the serpent is reluctant, dozes  
in the sparse warmth

at the foot of tree stumps. Blessed  
were the least of our brethren  
for they ate with the wrong fork,

chased gravy around thick plates  
with Wonder bread, didn't know  
the Sabbath from Shinola, therefore

were we holy. They shall move  
their lips when they read this  
and ignite the words with an index finger

run under the lines. If you know you can leave  
in the middle of the night in the middle of the war  
with a full tank of gas,

ye will never know them.

2

That the call may come forth like Jedidiah,  
fear not. In those mountain hollows,  
we grew eggs and beets, lifted up our eyes

for wild mushrooms. And King James  
opened and closed on us, seven days,  
with the ecstasy of pump organs.

So it is, cabbage roses flare  
on cold slipcovers and Mamma's shotgun  
pauses on its peg leg

back of the door. For when you went forth  
on visitations, your male flock,  
thirsty for salt, drew to the manse,

scared Mamma like daughters. Thus  
were sour mash jars lined up  
at the edge of the yard for targets.

And the steeple inched three times its length  
across the onion grass, pointing East  
to home. And the shadow of death

danced on good days in the corn crib,  
by sunset had crept under the fence,  
reaching for the root cellar. Only

the fast dark saved us.

3

And on the sixth day so also  
did you labor, upstairs  
preparing sermons, far from babies

congregating before Mamma  
for mashed bananas, turnips, the wrong  
salvation, our mouths open like fish

hungry for the hook. There, in an oak  
swivel chair, you rocked the Bible,  
your feet crossed on the desk. Whence

you went on your knees by the cot,  
pressing your forehead into your fists.  
We watched through the keyhole.

Come Sundays, I was old enough  
to sit in your lap, count seeds,  
the lumps of coal, the signed cuffs

in the collection plate. After, I rose up  
magnified as the angels, soared  
over Galilee down to Mamma

without touching the stairs, anointed  
by the lot of their inheritance,  
by the smell of your shirt.

I think Mamma was jealous your coin  
tethered her, made her belly so swollen  
her footsteps rattled china. She would

press the small of her back  
when the sun fell in window panes  
across Deuteronomy and the yellow pine floor

I didn't need, calling.

## WORLD WITHOUT END

My spanky Daddy. Always, you call it  
helping, your hands flashing to your waist,  
fingers blurring like lawn mower blades, and  
slash, leather rips from belt-loops,  
crazed, climbs the air overhead  
coiling. Always, I disappear. I am not

your teeny daughter in hand-smocked dresses  
your Mamma sent, my pretty new dresses  
with sashes cut off, your scissors  
raging through my closet so everyone  
can see, until the hems can be let down  
no further, my badness,

the stubs of my sashes sticking out  
like baby arms chopped off. Even grown, I am not  
your daughter when you're detaching my daughter,  
year by year, snip by snip, enticing her  
to come sit down beside you, snuggle, bring  
you all her problems with me

as if she were a sash and yours to wield  
like a belt on my bare heart, spanking  
Mommy until I'm embroidered with welts,  
smocked and ruched, with stubs  
sticking out, my mother arms  
chopped off. I am, as always, your

mother and your father and your wife,  
and you hit them and hit them  
and hit them. After, you feel  
so much better, so cheerful, so pained,  
vouchsafed and holy, that I know I am  
you, and it is good



I was a brave, stout-hearted, little boy  
shedding not a tear. And I climb on your lap,  
happy for you, and cover you  
with kisses, listening to you, snip by snip,  
warn me off my mother. Oh, yes, Daddy,  
this is love.

## POSITIVE THINKING

Mom have secret power to divine authentic  
thought and feeling, precisely what wrong  
with other people. And she always right.  
This no humdrum ESP or witchy ordination.  
Little bird knock on her sleep and tell her  
truth. In latest poop she see

I malignant. Doctors look concern.  
Doctors no understand Mom speak in metaphor.  
She also dream. They sharpen scalpels.  
I say "Mom, let's no tell anyone  
what you think of me." She promise  
she wouldn't, and she keep her promise,

she say. She only tell few aunts and uncles,  
brothers, cousins, hair dressers, and every  
prayer group from Richmond to Key West  
her opinion. They all assume missionary  
position, unbuckle my breasts, unscrew  
my uterus, hold them up to God's radiation —

in Southeast U.S. is okay to parade children  
naked without G-string for Jesus; it only give  
goose bumps and metastasize doubt. Doctors  
cut me open, search high and low for her faith.  
Nothing. Not irreligious cell in my body.  
Every hair benign. They stitch me up.

Greatest hospital on earth say  
Mom wrong. I call to tell her. I say,  
"Mom, you wrong. I have proof.  
Pages and pages of proof. Many lab report.  
I not malignant. I benign."  
"That the power of prayer," she say.

HOW I ENDURED

My part of life now learns  
how to be still. For long trees  
when they didn't move had been  
telling me about that. And a stone  
was telling me so even before the sun  
struck me dumb one day  
just by not answering, no matter  
how long the phone rang.

Besides, the length of Main Street gave  
its gift all day so silently to its houses,  
and sometimes looking in our window at night,  
I saw Father and Mother and me  
go away, and the ironing board stay,  
awkward and ignorant as ever.

## ON THE BOOKRACK AT CORNER DRUGS

*Second Chance at Love* leans toward  
*Passions Wild and Free* and stares across  
at *Impossible to Forget*; but *There Is No Tomorrow*  
hiding behind the big label "Romance"  
can't obscure *Circle of Deception*  
and the faded, torn cover of *Trust in Love*.

You can buy cures for these books,  
back in prescriptions — or if you have money or a car  
and can drive out to the high school dance  
where addicts of life grope toward this bookrack.

Or you can lean against this windowpane  
and imagine the ladies who wrote these lives,  
the frilled collars of Mimi Furion and  
Antonelle Remondo, and the chipped coffee cup  
beside the typewriter of that impassioned veteran  
Reba Swansone (carefully spelled with an "E"),  
putting it elegantly on the cover of her umpteenth  
novel *Waiting for a Star*, and then turning  
to wash the breakfast dishes in the afternoon light,  
the old cereal bowl for her golden wedding husband,  
"Good morning, Grumpy" printed on its generous side.

ONE FOR THE ROAD

On the old bicycle the plumber brought me  
Saint Christopher gleams by the traffic bell.  
"Good as new." He tapped a rusty fender.  
"The girl who rode it moved to Florida.  
She was some kind of teacher, too," he grinned.

No baskets, saddlebags, license, or lights.  
Eight novels crammed into my backpack —  
excessive as a life vest stuffed with stones —  
I pedal two miles to the travel agent  
to pay for my son's airline ticket home.

Twenty years ago I jogged to market  
bearing the light burden of him, bobbing  
against my back. Singing to rooks and jays,  
he dipped his head under the sky's wing.  
He was lighter than my dictionary.

On the threshold, when I set him down,  
my muscles quivered, light flooded my bones.  
I was a still lake holding up the sky.  
Now in his empty room, I hang the map  
that flopped out of the *National Geographic*.

Start with what you know, I tell my students.  
Detroit, New York, Ann Arbor, Battle Creek —  
the roads that spider off from towns I know  
are red as arteries that serve the heart  
and bring fresh news to all its distant cities,

Madison, Minneapolis-St. Paul.  
At his first solo flight away from home  
wearing the new jeans he'd bought for school,  
his father gave him a gold medal. "Given  
for good conduct all the years we had you,



and for good luck." A talisman, a blessing,  
friendly as butter: Christopher, untarnished,  
bearing the magic child across the stream.



## CONTRIBUTORS

A poet from Kashmir, AGHA SHAHID ALI teaches English and Creative Writing at Hamilton College. His new volume of poems, **A Nostalgist's Map of America**, has just been published by Norton. Previous publications include a volume of poems, **The Half-Inch Himalayas** (Wesleyan) and a volume of translations of the Urdu poet Faiz Ahmed Faiz, **The Rebel's Silhouette** (Peregrine Smith).

ANGELA BALL teaches at the Center for Writers at the University of Southern Mississippi. Her book, **Kneeling Between Parked Cars**, appeared in 1990 from Owl Creek Press.

SOPHIE CABOT BLACK most recently received the Masfield Award from the Poetry Society of America. This fall work of hers will also appear in **Kenyon Review** and **Antaeus**.

CHANA BLOCH's new book of poems, **The Past Keeps Changing**, will be published by Sheep Meadow Press next spring, and her translation of **The Song of Songs** (with Ariel Bloch) by Random House the following year. She teaches at Mills College in Oakland, California.

ROBERT BLY's recent book, **Iron John**, has been a best seller.

MARTHA COLLINS teaches at the University of Massachusetts in Boston. Her second collection of poems, **The Arrangement of Space**, has just appeared from Peregrine Smith.

SYLVA FISCHEROVÁ, Czech poet and philosopher, has appeared in **FIELD** previously. She has published two collections in her native country, and a selection of her work, **The Tremor of Racehorses**, is available in English from Bloodaxe Books in England.

W. W. Norton is scheduled to bring out MARY STEWART HAMMOND's first collection, **Out of Canaan**, this fall.

MIROSLAV HOLUB's most recent collection of poems, **Vanishing Lung Syndrome**, is available in this country from the **FIELD** Translation Series, and in England from Faber and Faber, which also published his recent book of essays, **The Dimension of the Present Moment**.

MARI-MARCELLE JANAS appeared in our last issue, with a guest review of Charles Simic. She teaches at Lorain County Community College in Elyria, Ohio.

CATHERINE PHIL MCCARTHY is an Irish poet who lives in Dublin. We asked her for a note on Knock, and got the following: "Knock, Co. Mayo, is a place of pilgrimage since the turn of the century. It honours the appearance of the Virgin Mary, with St. Joseph and St. John the Evangelist, to local people on the evening of August 21, 1879."

ROBERT MCNAMARA's first book, **Second Messengers**, was published by Wesleyan last year. He is at work on a new collection, tentatively titled **What We Are**.

SANDRA MCPHERSON, a regular contributor, teaches at the University of California, at Davis. Her new collection, **The God of Indeterminacy**, will appear from Illinois early in 1993.

MICHAEL MORSE, who graduated from Oberlin, is completing an MFA at the Iowa Writers' Workshop.

NINA NYHART has had two collections of poetry from Alice James Books: **Openers** and **French For Soldiers**.

DENNIS SCHMITZ published **Eden** in 1989. He is now at work on a Selected and New Poems.

WILLIAM STAFFORD's recent publications include **Passwords** (HarperCollins, 1991) and two chapbooks, **How To Hold Your Arms When It Rains** (Confluence Press, 1990) and **History Is Loose Again** (Honeybrook Press, 1991).

NANCY WILLARD fans are advised to look for **The Nancy Willard Reader**, from the University Press of New England, out soon, and also to watch for **Pish, Posh, Said Hieronymus Bosch** sometime this fall, and **Liberty Hall**, a novel.

JOHN WOODS's recent books include **The Salt Stone** and **The Valley of Minor Animals**, both from Dragon Gate. He teaches at Western Michigan University.

FRANZ WRIGHT's new collection, **The Night World & The Word Night**, will be out sometime in 1992. His revised and expanded version of **The Unknown Rilke** appeared earlier this year in the FIELD Translation Series.

CHARLES WRIGHT's newest book, **The World of the Ten Thousand Things**, was reviewed in these pages last spring.













IGOR STRAVINSKY AND VASLAV NIIJINSKY AS PETROUCHKA, c. 1911  
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